

---

Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository

---

8-5-2021 10:00 AM

## The Other Neighbour of El Otro Lado

Anahi Gonzalez Teran, *The University of Western Ontario*

Supervisor: Wood, Kelly, *The University of Western Ontario*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in  
Visual Arts

© Anahi Gonzalez Teran 2021

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd>



Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Latin American Languages and Societies Commons](#), and the [Photography Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Gonzalez Teran, Anahi, "The Other Neighbour of El Otro Lado" (2021). *Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository*. 7990.

<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/7990>

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact [wlsadmin@uwo.ca](mailto:wlsadmin@uwo.ca).

## **Abstract**

This written thesis is in support of a Master's of Fine Arts degree at Western University. The thesis dossier explores themes of Mexican migration in Canada engaging with ideas of human labour and various indexes of Mexican culture, trade, and economic exchange. The thesis also consists of documentation of public exhibitions and other various creative production components including videos, photography and multi-media installations. This thesis is separated into three major sections. The first is an extended artist statement which outlines my artistic research and my creative process as an artist. The second is a portfolio of photographic documentation of artworks made during my Master of Fine Arts candidacy. The third is a case study examining the photographic series "Fragmented Cities" and "Carpoolers" by artist Alejandro Cartagena, who draws attention to social, urban, and environmental issues in Latin America.

## **Keywords**

Migrant Labour, Mexican Migrant Workers, Photography, Visual Culture, Disposability, Representation, Mexico and Canada, Mexican Costumbrismo.

## **Summary for Lay Audience**

How does photography impact the labour classification system? This thesis explores the economic exchange between Canada and Mexico by examining the photographic event and the political meanings behind bringing human bodies into focus.

## Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my supervisor Kelly Wood, for their guidance and support. Besides my supervisor, I would also like to thank all the faculty. Particularly professors Patrick Mahon, David Merritt, Soheila Kolahdouz Esfahani, Jennifer Martin and Drs. Christine Sprengler, Sarah Bassnett, Christof Migone, and Cody Barteet for their encouragement and insightful comments during my master's program.

I am so fortunate to have shared many experiences these past two years with my cohort, who inspired me with their talent and enthusiasm. To Euan, Rebecca, Tommy, and Michelle, who are now family: You helped me and my artistic practice grow in ways I never expected. Thank you.

Gracias NODO, por abrirle las puertas a este proyecto y a mi. A la increíble arquitecta Adriana Reynaga, quien llevó la instalación y organización de mi exposición en México. A los diseñadores gráficos y artistas visuales Jeisel Hernández y José Luis Esquivel, por la documentación de mi exposición en México. Gracias amigos, sin su apoyo y talento, esto no hubiera sido posible.

Gracias a mis amigas del alma: Marcela, Sofía, Natalia, Anaïs y Camie, quienes estuvieron en la distancia siempre apoyándome estos últimos dos años.

Este trabajo va dedicado a mi familia. A mi papá, gracias por los consejos y ser fuente de inspiración en mi práctica artística; al final todas esas horas de escuchar a Piporro, dieron fruto. A las mujeres de mi vida, mi mamá, Mariana, mi abuela Lilia y Larissa, espero algún día llegar a ser como ustedes. Familia: Mi vida sin su amor y apoyo, no sería igual.

Migrant Rights Network – Ontario: <https://migrantworkersalliance.org/donate/>



## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	ii
<b>Keywords</b>	ii
<b>Summary for Lay Audience</b>	iii
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	iv
<b>Table of Contents</b>	v
<b>Preface</b>	1
<b>Chapter 1: Comprehensive Artist Statement</b>	
<i>México Lindo y Otras Cosas / Lovely Mexico and Other Things</i>	3
<i>Cruzando al Otro Lado / Crossing to The Other Side</i>	6
<i>De La Otra Manera / The Other Way</i>	10
<i>El Otro Vecino: Canadá / The Other Neighbour: Canada</i>	14
<b>Works Cited</b>	17
<b>Supplemental Reading List</b>	18
<b>Chapter 2: Practice Documentation</b>	19
<b>Chapter 3: Huddled Narratives: Case Study of Fragmented Cities and Carpoolers</b>	
<b>Photographic Series</b>	
<i>Introduction</i>	31
<i>Suburbia Mexicana: Fragmented Cities</i>	32
<i>Carpoolers</i>	36
<i>Mexican Representation on Imagery</i>	40
<b>Works Cited</b>	43
<b>List of figures</b>	45
<b>Curriculum Vitae</b>	48

## Preface

This written thesis accompanies two simultaneous exhibitions in two locations: *The Other Neighbour of El Otro Lado* at the Artlab (London, ON, Canada) and El NODO (Saltillo, COAH, Mexico). Having two simultaneous Master of Fine Art thesis exhibitions, one in northeastern Mexico and one in southwestern Ontario, is an important event for my artistic practice and final project. Both exhibitions engage with Mexican migration and Mexican labour, and together they echo the importance of creating a narrative between Mexico and Canada without the narrative influence of *el otro lado*: The United States.

The location of the Mexican exhibition is in El NODO, a cultural space that was previously the only passenger train station of the city of Saltillo in the northeastern state of Coahuila, Mexico. While the train station was closed in 1997 and is no longer in service, the rails alongside it are still alive with the passing of cargo trains. El NODO was built in 2010 with the idea of creating a participatory cultural milieu, to mediate between the disintegrated and marginalized neighborhoods next to the rails and with the city as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the dilapidated station, when standing in the space, the booming train horn and cracking metal from the train rails are a constant presence. The waiting hall, that now is the gallery, is trapped in time. The benches that once were frequented by travellers, now sit dusty and in a state of disuse. The contrasting blend of the railway's vital sounds and the quiet abandonment of the station makes the NODO's expanse a resilient and improvised space. My installation of photographs and media in this new gallery space is surrounded by the ever-present sound of the forceful train horn: it is a constant, daily reminder of movement and being in-transit.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ctrl+Z Arquitectura, "LaTren - Centro Cultural Ciudadano," Ctrl+Z Arquitectura, accessed March 10, 2021, <http://control-zeta.org/archives/206>.

The train horn is a sonic part of the artwork in situ, but the sound also moves outwards. Where is the final destination? Where do we—Mexicans—go?

The second location is at the Artlab Gallery, a taintless art exhibition space located in the Visual Arts department at Western University.<sup>2</sup> When standing in the space, the quietness is a constant presence. The Artlab's white walls and free-flowing expanse give the space an uncharacteristic calm. The train horn is not organically part of the artwork in situ, but because of the visual and installation connections I have made with both exhibitions, I argue: Canada is the final destination of both.

All media and installation documentation can be accessed online beginning August 2nd, 2021 at:  
[www.theotherneighbour.com](http://www.theotherneighbour.com)

Artist Website: [www.anahigonzalez.com](http://www.anahigonzalez.com)

---

<sup>2</sup> Visual Arts Department, "About Artlab Gallery." Western University. Accessed June 3, 2021.  
<https://www.uwo.ca/visarts/artlab/about.html>

## Chapter 1

### Comprehensive Artist Statement

#### México Lindo y Otras Cosas / Lovely Mexico and Other Things.

“Como el águila en vuelo. Como la fiera en celo.  
Desafiando fronteras, defendiendo el honor.  
He pasado la vida explorando otras tierras,  
para darle a mis hijos un mañana mejor.”<sup>3</sup>

“Like the eagle in flight. Like the beast in heat.  
Challenging borders, defending honor.  
I've spent my life exploring other lands,  
to give my children a better tomorrow.”<sup>4</sup>

Human labour and migration are two concepts that have shaped my artistic practice. The migration paths and labour struggles that have been culturally encoded in aural and visual histories by the Mexican diaspora<sup>5</sup> are elements that I explore within my research. My decision to emigrate to Canada prompted me to also examine the economic relationship between Mexico and Canada through Mexican labour and Mexican body representation in related migration photographic imagery. The question is, does the United States' stereotypical image construction of Mexican labour influence the occupational classification of Mexicans in Canada as well?

As a northern Mexican, the relationship between my home country and the northern countries continues to be ever-present through the flow of trade goods and commerce, labour flows and tourism. The idea that the United States and Canada have a special relationship,

---

<sup>3</sup> Los Tigres del Norte, “De Paisano a Paisano”, track #1 on De Paisano a Paisano. Fonovisa Records, 2000, CD.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., trans. Anahí González Terán.

<sup>5</sup> I employ throughout my artist statement the term Mexican diaspora, recognizing that the Mexican diaspora includes people that have claimed the Mexican identity and others that have had the Mexican identity forced on them.

excluding Mexico, has done damage to the idea of an integrated North America.<sup>6</sup> Based on Andrés Rozental's affirmations, a Mexican diplomat and member of the Inter-American Dialogue, I argue the role of Mexican territory and Mexican labourers is a form of capital used by Canada for their economic advantage.

Mexico and the United States' economic and labour relationship dates back to the 1800s. There exists extensive visual and musical documentation narrating the history of this economic relationship.<sup>7</sup> Although Mexico is a country of emigration, primarily to the United States, after NAFTA's implementation in 1994, trade and emigration between Canada and Mexico has increased. Differential terms, in both relationships, has caused a limited visual and musical documentation of such migration journeys to Canada. The deep and extensive migrational history between Mexico and the United States shapes the newer one between Mexico and Canada. I aim to actively participate in the making of such migrational history in Canada, creating visual alternatives concerned with the politics of Mexican identity and representation abroad. My purpose is to decenter the United States narrative concerning Mexican migration by creating images related to Mexican labour in a Canadian context.

In my work, I turn to the music genres of *música norteña* and *corridos*. Such music genres provide key aural documentary elements of the Mexican migrational experience to the United States. These elements help me contextualize my images and installations of Mexican labour in Canadian territory. In my photography and expanded media practice, I also engage and challenge the popular archetypes used to represent migrant Mexican bodies in imagery called in

---

<sup>6</sup> Andrés Rozenta, "A Mexican Perspective," FOCAL, November 13, 2009, [https://www.focal.ca/pdf/Mexico\\_Rozental\\_A%20Mexican%20Perspective\\_November%202009.pdf](https://www.focal.ca/pdf/Mexico_Rozental_A%20Mexican%20Perspective_November%202009.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Cathy Ragland, *Música Norteña: Mexican Migrants Creating a Nation between Nations* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), p. 5.

Mexico and internationally as *Costumbrismo*. I will explore these two cultural typologies, discuss how I use them in my artwork, and examine historical and cultural transformations, and how we—Mexicans<sup>8</sup>—view ourselves and how this practice has shaped our national identity and continues to influence how we are perceived by the international sphere.

As part of my creative process, I used social media as a vital new tool to connect with others in the Mexican community in Canada. Facebook and Whatsapp have been social media platforms that have helped me reach and connect with the community that is now producing new music, stories, and imagery, and indeed, new notions of the Mexican diaspora in the digital era. These platforms provide a context where people, regardless of the distance, can communicate and interact with each other, maintaining links and sharing “posts” and “events”. According to Rebecca Sawyer, people tend to use social media platforms to integrate into the host culture and maintain connections to their home countries.<sup>9</sup>

I have had the opportunity to connect with more than sixty Mexican migrants in London and the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). I met with them at their homes, working places, or virtually. These meetings and collaborations helped me to produce some of my aural and visual works for my two simultaneous exhibitions in two locations: *The Other Neighbour of El Otro Lado* at the Artlab (London, ON, Canada) and NODO (Saltillo, COAH, Mexico) and also served to build my network, share and exchange my thoughts about “Mexicanity” with my community as a recent Mexican migrant in Canada.

---

<sup>8</sup> I employ the term “Mexican” throughout my artist statement acknowledging that Mexico is a state, as Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil has already pointed out in her article “Never Again Mexico without Us?\*” where Mexico has encapsulated and denied many nations.

<sup>9</sup> Rebecca Sayer and Guon-Ming Chen, *The impact of Social Media on Intercultural Adaptation*. Intercultural Communication Studies vol. 21, no. 2. (2012): 155.  
<https://web.uri.edu/iaics/files/09RebeccaSawyerGuoMingChen.pdf>

## Cruzando al Otro Lado / Crossing to The Other Side

“Antes iba al otro lado escondido de la gente pues pasaba de mojado.  
Ahora tengo mi papeles ya estoy dentro de la ley.  
Tomo whiskey o la tequila.  
¡Hasta en medio del high way!”<sup>10</sup>

“I used to cross over, hiding from people because I crossed as a wetback.  
Now I have my papers, and I’m within the law.  
I drink my whiskey or tequila even in the middle of the highway!”<sup>11</sup>

“Ajua, Ajua!” My dad used to sing along with the songs of Piporro, a northern Mexican humorist singer-songwriter, on our annual crossings to *el otro lado*. Growing up, *música norteña* and *corridos*, were genres that I constantly listened to in gatherings and daily life.<sup>12</sup>

Respectively, it is important for me to contextualize how and why the analysis of the *musica norteña* and *corridos* is important in my artistic practice. The northern Mexican people and *musica norteña*, share deep origins. Both are resilient, historically and politically.<sup>13</sup> As a Northern Mexican, it is common to hear stories in daily conversations and in the media of people migrating to the United States for a better life and jobs—stories of people I might know or not—but also members of my own family that have crossed the border illegally and legally, searching for better opportunities. These stories can be found in *musica norteña* and *corridos* as narrative evidence of the migrant experience, providing an in-depth history of Mexican border-migrant culture.

---

<sup>10</sup> Piporro (Lalo González) y Conjunto Norteño de V. M. Pazos, “Chulas Fronteras”, side B. Capitol Records, 1957, Vinyl 7”.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., trans. Anahí González Terán.

<sup>12</sup> Cathy Ragland, *Música Norteña: Mexican Migrants Creating a Nation between Nations* describes the *corrido* as a popular narrative song form, which was the primary vehicle for the exploits pre-revolutionary and revolutionary bandit heroes (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), p. 35.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 30.

While *música nortea* and *corridos* work as anthems of resilience and empowerment for Mexican labourers and Mexican diaspora, they also contribute to a narrative where the labour conditions are romanticized in order to promote an unbalanced system. In doing so, it speaks to the economic, political, and cultural issues that converge around migrant labour and geography agenda. Labourers' stereotypes in visual culture and music can be harmful because it can create cycles of exploitation. Images where Mexican bodies are exploited with romanticized statements such as “Mexicans are hard workers” homogenizes all people into a ‘Mexicanity’. A community’s resilience should be centered, but we need to question and look at the system which creates the injustices and disparities around human labour. When using the narrative cues of these music genres in my work, I re-interpret and question: What kind of work are Mexicans expected to fulfil in the international labour system?

In my video installations, I gather symbols of resilience, nostalgia, and power narrated in these music genres and re-interpret them by placing them in landscapes where human traces of adaptability and mobility are present. Instead of using the predominantly male voice popularly used in these music genres, I chose to work with recordings of a northern Mexican woman singer. Her connection to the train rails located in the city of Saltillo—that connects Mexico to the United States and Canada—is important for the interpretation of the lyrics. Her reinterpretation defies the male-dominant narrative while navigating the spaces where Mexican labour is transported to the northern countries. Her voice was recorded close to the train rails in the city of Saltillo. I used Whatsapp to access the audios I use in my other video pieces. In the single-channel videos *Mover* [Figure 1] and *Is The Train Coming? Roll Down Your Window!* [Figure 2], the audio was sent separately using the platform. Such a gesture not only helps me in the exchange of information, but it resonates with me in finding my community in Canada.



Music and images work together as languages beyond language with complex relationships of sounds, stories, and visual cues that are used to reference events and things in this world. These assemblages enable us to express meanings and communicate thoughts to other people or communities. Stuart Hall's representation theories argue that at the heart of the cultural process, we must relate to systems of representation.

The first enables us to give meaning to the world by constructing a set of correspondences or a chain of equivalence between things—people, objects, events, abstract ideas, etc.—and our system of concept maps. The relationship between “things,” concepts, and signs lie at the heart of the production of meaning in language. The process which links these three elements together is what we call representation.<sup>14</sup>

One of the concepts used constantly as an identity symbol in *musica norteña* and *corrido* is the word *mojado*. Through the years, the word translated in English—wetback—has been used as an insult to reference Mexicans in the United States. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, wetback defines a term for a Mexican, especially a labourer who crosses the border between Mexico and the United States illegally. However, in *musica norteña* and *corridos*, the term *mojado*'s negative connotations are defied and effectively overturns the capitalist society's ideal that human value is determined by a person's distance from manual labour. *Mojado* has emerged as an identity symbol of power and pride within the system of migration in the Mexican community.<sup>15</sup> Because of its connection with labour, Mexicanity, and defiance, I was interested

---

<sup>14</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation - Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: SAGE Publ., 1997. p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 140.

in the construction of the word *mojado* within these lyrics and wanted to transform it into an image in a Canadian context. The creation of this new meaning has been at the forefront of my practice and is evident in my photographic series *Congelado(s)* [Figure 3].

I selected the lyric fragments from the popular songs of “Vivan Los Mojados,” “El Mojado Acaudalado,” and “Chulas Fronteras” that narrated Mexican diaspora labour conditions and I have re-contextualized them, visually, in Canadian landscapes. In one of the lyrical fragments, the song narrates how originally the *mojado* moves during the night to hide from the law, and now that he is legal, he enjoys the freedom of crossing in the middle of the highway. I chose to photograph during the night, to bring attention to the illegal conditions that Mexican labour faces and underline the coldness Mexicans can experience in Canada. I have created an allegory of coldness, not only in terms of weather but in the nostalgia of once belonging to a community that is no longer within arms reach.

In order to understand Mexican migration representation, it is crucial to connect the in-depth meanings of *música norteña* and *corridos* with Mexican body representations in historical imagery. Both the music and the imagery have served as symbols of nationalism both within and outside Mexico. Holding these tools of analysis, the following section will act as an exploration of the racialized “other” in the construction of representations of Mexican identity in the global field.

## De La Otra Manera / The Other Way

“Me disfracé de gabacho y me pinté el pelo güero,  
y como no hablaba ingles, que me retachan de nuevo.”<sup>16</sup>

“I disguised myself as a white boy and dyed my hair blond,  
but since I didn’t speak English, once again I was thrown out.”<sup>17</sup>

During the nineteenth-century, Mexico enabled visitors, explorers, and artists to visit the country; subsequently, a group of travelling artists began producing images representing the habitats, land, customs, and many more facets of the “Mexican experience”.<sup>18</sup> However, these “foreign” image constructions were received unexamined as authentic and objective documentation by the Mexican government and the international sphere. These popular images were then used as the foundation of Mexican imagery and were the genesis of Mexican stereotypes.<sup>19</sup> I ask, how does an outsider’s perspective contribute to the creation of Mexican identity?

We can examine the Mexican *costumbrista* movement for what it reveals about the Mexican collective identity and discover therein an indication of the role of visuality in the nation-building process. *Mexican Costumbrismo: Race, Society, and Identity* outlines an alternative perspective of this movement. Mey-Yen Moriuchi studies mediums such as painting

---

<sup>16</sup> Vicente Fernandez, “Vicente Fernandez”, track #1. Sony Discos, 1994, CD.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., trans. Anahí González Terán.

<sup>18</sup> The literature work, *Los Mexicanos Pintados Por Si Mismos*, published between 1854-1855 by Mexican artists contained texts and illustrations that distilled a pluralism of Mexicans into a single ideological identity. The *costumbrismo* literature and art works, worked as a transmitter of images of Mexican types and labour to other countries.

<sup>19</sup> Cathy Ragland, *Música Norteña: Mexican Migrants Creating a Nation between Nations* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), p.73.

and photography and argues for the implications of *costumbrismo* in the late 1800s to twentieth-century Mexican modernism.

Costumbrismo designates a cultural trend in Latin American and Spain towards representing local customs, types, costumes, and scenes of everyday life, and it offers a powerful statement about shifting terms of Mexican identity that had a lasting impact on Mexican history.<sup>20</sup>

Moriuchi notes that identity in the Mexican *Costumbrismo* was an elite construction dominated by male figures. The movement also suggested a false unity portraying a one-dimensional stereotype of the everyday lives of the lower and middle classes using tailored elements of clothes, occupations, food, and Mexican bodies.<sup>21</sup> Claudio Linati's *Tortilleras* lithography from 1823 and the carte-de-visite *Tortilleras* from 1865 by the *costumbrista* photographer Francois Aubert, exemplifies the additional problem of romanticizing and sexualizing Mexican labour. Olivier Debrouse recognizes the class division in these images during the period of industrialization and sees in them the desire for global reorganization in Mexican society:

The people typically portrayed in these *constumbrista* micro scenes were very rarely contemporary common farm labourers and never aristocrats or bureaucrats. There were no businessmen, professionals, doctors, bankers, much less women of high society. They were

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 20.

those people who never attained the full status of citizenship but who, nonetheless, were indispensable to the functioning of the city: the essential link between the bourgeoisie and the rest of the world.<sup>22</sup>

With the introduction of photography in the 19th century in Mexico, the early Mexican *costumbrista* images were then translated to staged and theatricalized documents. In Claude Désiré's carte-de-visite *Vendedor de Ollas*, we see the submissiveness of the subject's pose, exemplifying the visual representation of lower-class Mexican labourers in the *costumbrismo* movement.<sup>23</sup> While the spectacle of "the other" and the victimization of bodies in photography are evident, it is argued that the artistic direction of the photographers posing the subjects incites the ephemerality not only of the photograph itself, but of the disposable nature of the subjects. Are Mexican labourers disposable?

Photography in the *costumbrismo* movement was based on real observations but came to serve as stereotypical constructions, effectuating the otherness and isolation of those portrayed over time. I make the case that such constructed images still perpetuate the nowadays disposable Mexican labour collective identity. These trends disproportionately affect Mexican labourers' bodies within the histories of photography and modern visual culture and work as politically active agents in the modern occupational classification. The foreign formulation of the Mexican *costumbrista* movement impacts my own artistic process. When thinking about who the image

---

<sup>22</sup> Olivier Debroise, *Mexican Suite: a History of Photography in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), pp. 177-178.

<sup>23</sup> Mey-Yen Moriuchi, *Mexican Costumbrismo: Race, Society, and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Art*, 220, The origins of *costumbrismo* date back to the Golden Age of Spanish literature in the 16th and 17th centuries. During the 18th century, it grew into sketches that depict typical characters of the region in a satirical and philosophical intent.

creator is and the purpose of such imagery construction; I question my role as a photographer, as an active agent in the event of photography.

In *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*, Ariella Azoulay argues for new interpretative boundaries of the medium through an awareness of photography's aesthetic and political and civil relations. She questions photography as a stagnant event and contends that through an examination of the agents involved—camera, photographer, photograph, the subject portrayed, and the spectator viewing—all should be actively assessed rather than just the final object: a photograph.<sup>24</sup> The traces of encounters between the agents in the event of photography have been at the forefront of my practice. I'm concerned about the victimization and aestheticization of Mexican migrant bodies. I too, think about photographs as more than only evidence, but also as a political act to question the motives of the ones who move people and create images of such movement.

Like Azoulay, I engage with the event of photography through my creative practice. I argue for the usage of photography as a tool in the construction—and deconstruction—of the Mexican diaspora identity and labour classification system. Building on the Mexican *costumbrista* history, I believe that by exploring various indexes of Mexicanity, elements can be re-used to create new narratives related to labour and migration without visually victimizing Mexican bodies in the event of photography. If the costumbrismo movement could be said to have created a “cheap visual economy” meant to promote the idea of cheap labour in the greater global economy; then my work seeks to deconstruct the Mexican national branding where a condensed portrayal of stereotypical images are packaged and sent to other countries. My work

---

<sup>24</sup> Ariella Azoulay and Louise Bethlehem, *Civil Imagination: a Political Ontology of Photography* (London: Verso, 2015), p. 11.

seeks to undo and redress these stereotypical Mexican migrant images that have promoted and justified an unbalanced North American labour system.

### **El Otro Vecino: Canadá / The Other Neighbour: Canada**

In my photographic series *Los Vecinos* [Figure 4], I explore the trail of Mexican labour with elements of the exportation and importation of trade goods: cardboard boxes. When talking about the exportation and importation event, I question: What and who moves? How do they move? I photographed the sites of Latin Markets in southern Ontario as a place that connects labour, movement, and Mexicanity with Canada. Using empty cardboard boxes as a sign and cipher of an absent labourer, I bring attention to how the system of powers perceive Mexican labour as mobile, multi-purpose, temporary, and disposable.

The train has been a constant element in my formative years. It carries goods to the north, and it provides transit for Latin American migrants moving across Mexico. I have found this act striking in relation to tracing human labour through my hometown train. I engage with what the train represents in this industrial network between countries, by looking at the train's movement. While the train carts can be loaded with goods made by Mexican labourers can freely enter North American countries, migrants jumping on the train are denied entry to such territories.

Through this exploration and understanding, I sense a deep heaviness every time I see the train in Mexico. The train cars inside are full of goods and in their outside traces of mobility remain—clothes, water bottles, cardboard, plastic bags, people, etc.—that were and are hiding on the train. In Canada, I sense a profound lightness every time I see the train. Some of the train cars are empty and others are still full. The exterior of the train cars feels different, the traces that I saw in Mexico aren't present now in Canada. I connect the train carts—metal boxes—with the cardboard boxes that I find in Latin Markets. Both containers are filled in Mexico with goods

and are delivered to the northern countries. The train in Mexico is loud while passing through the cities; its horn proudly announces its way to the north. I engage with both visual and sound railway cues that connect both countries to emphasize the inadvertent power of Canada over Mexico concerning human labour.

Stuart Hall's concept of "representing difference" is an important signifying practice I have employed in my creative research and artwork.<sup>25</sup> In sum, he claims that modern visual culture has been a powerful agent in the construction of stereotyping and racism from systems of power: this is what he calls "difference." Throughout my practice and research, I have interpreted and incorporated two ways of "representing difference:" the first is to incorporate those stereotypical images within my work; the second is to re-contextualize them in a different way—to differentiate the differencing. Just as the musical artists of *música nortea* and *corridos*, overturned the word *mojado* in their lyrics to have a more recuperative meaning; my photography and multi-media installations, similarly, incorporates and overturns the visual remnants of *costumbrismo*—where and when they have been found indexes of Mexicanity. Such indexes have been the focus of my creative research and artwork; and, in finding them, especially in Canadian contexts, I have encountered everything from visual ironies to poetic drama.

I have worked to compositionally enhance the inherent complexities of these photographically documented scenes in ways that contribute to a more socially nuanced perspective of Mexican labour and identity. I assert here that my artwork provokes a deep conversation about photographs, which are a small part of the event of photography: products of work. The creation of non-conventional imagery about the relationship between Canada and

---

<sup>25</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation - Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: SAGE Publ., 1997), p. 245.



Mexico in my work is vital. It contributes to an alternative narrative that defies both Mexican and foreign image creators about Mexican labour.

## Works Cited

- Rozenta, Andrés. "A Mexican Perspective," FOCAL, November 13, 2009, [https://www.focal.ca/pdf/Mexico\\_Rozental\\_A%20Mexican%20Perspective\\_November%20009.pdf](https://www.focal.ca/pdf/Mexico_Rozental_A%20Mexican%20Perspective_November%20009.pdf).
- Azoulay, Ariella, and Louise Bethlehem. *Civil Imagination: a Political Ontology of Photography*. London: Verso, 2015.
- Ctrl+Z Arquitectura. "LaTren - Centro Cultural Ciudadano ." Ctrl+Z Arquitectura. Accessed March 10, 2021. <http://control-zeta.org/archives/206>.
- Debroise, Olivier. *Mexican Suite: a History of Photography in Mexico*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001.
- Yásnaya, Elena A. Gil. "Never Again Mexico without Us?\*": Issue #002." *Dispatches Journal*, January 31, 2020. <http://dispatchesjournal.org/articles/never-again-mexico-without-us/>.
- Hall, Stuart. *Representation - Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: SAGE Publ., 1997.
- Los Tigres del Norte. "De Paisano a Paisano", track #1 on De Paisano a Paisano. Fonovisa Records, 2000, CD.
- Los Tigres del Norte. "Mis Dos Patrias", track #5 on Tu Noche Con...Fonovisa, 2008, CD.
- Moriuchi, Mey-Yen. *Mexican Costumbrismo: Race, Society, and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Art*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018.
- Piporro (Lalo González) y Conjunto Norteño de V. M. Pazos, "Chulas Fronteras", side B. Capitol Records, 1957, Vinyl 7".
- Ragland, Cathy. *Música Norteña: Mexican Migrants Creating a Nation between Nations*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009.
- Rebecca Sayer and Guon-Ming Chen. *The impact of Social Media on Intercultural Adaptation*. *Intercultural Communication Studies* vol. 21, no. 2. (2012): 155. <https://web.uri.edu/iaics/files/09RebeccaSawyerGuoMingChen.pdf>
- Fernandez, Vicente. "Vicente Fernandez", track #1. Sony Discos, 1994, CD.

Visual Arts Department. "About Artlab Gallery." Western University. Accessed June 3, 2021.  
<https://www.uwo.ca/visarts/artlab/about.html>

### Supplemental Reading List

Below area list of works which influenced my creative research but were not directly cited in the Comprehensive Artist Statement.

Berger, John. Essay. In *About Looking*, 31–67. New York: Vintage Books, 1980.

Berger, Martin A., and David J. Garrow. Essay. In *Seeing through Race: a Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography*, 9–111. Berkeley (Calif.): University of California Press, 2011.

Ditta, Su, and Marnie Fleming. *Track Records: Trains and Contemporary Photography*. Oakville, Ontario: Oakville Galleries in collaboration with the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography = Oakville Galleries en collab. avec le Musée canadien de la photographie contemporaine, 1997.

Gil, Yásnaya Elena A. "El Estado Mexicano Como Apropiador Cultural: Yásnaya Elena A. Gil." *Revista de la Universidad de México*, July 2018.  
<https://www.revistadelauniversidad.mx/articles/0bb50a13-2ad8-40e3-9972-5f35dd35184f/el-estado-mexicano-como-apropiador-cultural>.

Mraz, John, and Storey Vélez Jaime. *Uprooted Braceros in the Hermanos Mayo Lens*. Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 2017.

Tejada, Roberto. Essay. *National Camera: Photography and Mexico's Image Environment*, 55–166. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Wells, Liz, Derrick Price, Michelle Henning, Patricia Holland, and Anandi Ramamurthy. Essay. *Photography: a Critical Introduction*, 167–204. London: Routledge, 2015.

## Chapter 2

### Practice Documentation



**Figure 1.0** Video still from *Mover*, single-channel, 3:28, September 2020



**Figure 1.1** *Mover*, installation view, single-channel, Iphone, 3:28, dimensions varied, September 2020

The video was filmed on the streets of Aylmer, Ontario while I was *moved* by a Canadian person through the town. The video is accompanied by audio sent by my maternal grandmother—living in Mexico—to her via Whatsapp.



**Figure 2.0** Video still from *Is The Train Coming? Roll Down The Window!*, single-channel, 3:16, December 2020



**Figure 2.1** *Is The Train Coming? Roll Down The Window!* (Left), installation view, single-channel, 3:16, dimensions varied, December 2020



**Figure 3.0** *No Parking* from the series *Congelado(s)*, inkjet Print, dimensions 16" x 20", February 2020

The series *Congelado(s)* was made in London, Ontario.





**Figure 3.1** *Corre, Corre* from the series *Congelado(s)*, inkjet print, dimensions 16" x 20", February 2020



**Figure 3.2** *Real Professionals* from the series *Congelado(s)*, inkjet print, dimensions 16" x 20", February 2020



**Figure 4.0** *Exportaciones* from the series *Los Vecinos*, inkjet print, dimensions 42" x 60", July 2020



**Figure 4.1** *Premium Pac* from the series *Los Vecinos*, inkjet print, dimensions 42" x 60", July 2020





**Figure 4.2** *Unidades* from the series *Los Vecinos*, Inkjet Print, Dimensions 42" x 60", July 2020



**Figure 5.0** *Nieve Ramos* from the series *Como Que Estoy y No Estoy*, inkjet print, dimensions 42" x 60", December 2020

In *Como Que Estoy Y No Estoy* I engage with the illegality, adaptability and mobility of Mexican labour in the boulevard of Isidro Lopez, located in the Northern Mexican city of Saltillo, Coahuila.



**Figure 5.1** *Desayunos* from the series *Como Que Estoy y No Estoy*, inkjet print, dimensions 42" x 60", December 2020



**Figure 5.2** *A La Vuelta* from the series *Como Que Estoy y No Estoy*, inkjet print, dimensions 42" x 60", December 2020





**Figure 6.0** *Scan #2* from the series *Content Must be Revised*, inkjet print, dimensions 35" x 35", August 2020-ongoing



**Figure 6.1** *Scan #5* from the series *Content Must be Revised*, inkjet print, dimensions 35" x 35", August 2020-ongoing



**Figure 6.3** *Scan #11* from the series *Content Must be Revised*, inkjet print, dimensions 35" x 35", August 2020-ongoing



**Figure 6.4** *Scan #20* from the series *Content Must be Revised*, inkjet print, dimensions 35" x 35", August 2020-ongoing



**Figure 6.5** *Content Must Be Revised* installation, custom sticker, QR code, dimensions 7" x 4", September 2020



**Figure 7.0** *Best By:* Video Installation, Single Channel, Ipad (inside the brown box), 2:20 min, April 2021,



**Figure 7.1** Video still from *Best By*: Single Channel, Ipad, 2:20 min, April 2021



**Figure 8.0** *Cajitas*, Cardboard Boxes from Mexico found in Ontarian Latin Markets, Dimensions Varied, May 2021-ongoing

## Chapter 3

### Huddled Narratives: Case Study of Fragmented Cities and Carpoolers Photographic Series

“Yo soy del norte, y es mi orgullo  
que se note, soy de Monterrey.”<sup>26</sup>

“I am from the north, and it’s my pride  
that it shows, I’m from Monterrey.”<sup>27</sup>

#### Introduction

When you think of Mexico, what comes to your mind? The answer to this question depends less on personal experiences and more on the symbols and icons produced and shared by a dominant agent.<sup>28</sup>

Alejandro Cartagena is a photographer based in Monterrey, a city located in the northeast of Mexico. Through photographing landscape scenes and portrait scenarios, his artistic practice explores labour, migration, location, and economic and environmental issues. Cartagena develops long-term photographic projects, offering a pointed visual investigation of the multiple and complex issues in Monterrey's metropolitan area.<sup>29</sup> Cartagena's photographic works, “Fragmented

---

<sup>26</sup> Piporro (Lalo González) “Soy De Monterrey” track #10 on 15 Exitos De Colección, Orfeon, 2012, CD.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., trans. Anahí González Terán.

<sup>28</sup> César Villanueva Rivas, “The Rise and Fall of Mexico's International Image: Stereotypical Identities, Media Strategies and Diplomacy Dilemmas.” *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 7, no. 1 (February 2011): 24. <https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2011.4>; César Villanueva Rivas argues that international country-images are mostly a set of “uneven simplifications based on a set of stereotypical identities difficult to govern and manage,” making globalization a new way of bringing actors in the production stage of stereotypical identities of countries in the media such as films, press, internet, shows, and others.

<sup>29</sup> “Alejandro Cartagena Is a Mexican Photographer, Studio Artist and Bookmaker.” Alejandro Cartagena. Accessed July 15, 2020. <http://www.alejandrocartergena.com/>



Cities” and “Carpoolers,” exhibit the invisible loopholes in Mexican society<sup>30</sup>—realities of the homeownership of Mexicans, social mobility, safety, corruption, and internal colonial practices.

### **Suburbia Mexicana: Fragmented Cities**

“Suburbia Mexicana” comprises five connected projects that focus on the suburban sprawl of Monterrey's metropolitan area. Cartagena began this five-part project with the series “Fragmented Cities,” in which from 2006 to 2009, he documented the abstract functions of homeownership in Mexico. In Mexico, the government has found ways to encourage homeownership: building cheap single-family houses, creating national housing funds such as Infonavit in Mexico, and romanticizing the idea of stability through the owning of a house.<sup>31</sup>

To reflect on the Mexican landscape is to reflect on the significance of housing. Housing is connected to the building of society, resulting in spaces functioning as scenarios of socialization, economical processes, and cultural expressions. Cartagena’s photo series engages with such housing interpretation in the city of Monterrey and the history of violence and exclusion exposed through these spaces.<sup>32</sup>

How does life perform itself, or how has it been planned around such housing development? Through Cartagena’s housing landscapes, we see huddled, colourful, new, and

---

<sup>30</sup> I employ the term “Mexican” or “Mexican Society” throughout this case study acknowledging that Mexico is a state, where Mexico has encapsulated and denied many nations based on Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil affirmations.

<sup>31</sup> Alan Gilbert, *La Vivienda En América Latina*, Instituto Interamericano para el Desarrollo Social, Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo., I-7UE/Es , September 2001. p. 32.  
<https://publications.iadb.org/publications/spanish/document/La-vivienda-en-Am%C3%A9rica-Latina.pdf>; When using the term encouraging homeownership, I am referring to Gilbert's discussion about governments pushing for owner-occupied housing because they believe that a society in which a majority is a house owner will be more likely to maintain some stability.

<sup>32</sup> Raul Eduardo López Estrada and Jorge Leal Iga, “Social Housing Policy in Mexico: The Case of a Neighborhood in Monterrey Peripheral.” *Cuadernos de Vivienda y Urbanismo* 5, no. 10 (2012). pg. 273.

empty homes far from the established infrastructures of the city. The emptiness and regularity of the structures set against the rugged mountain terrain, gives the viewer of the photographs an uncanny feeling of displacement. Landscapes that show wide-angle views intertwine with issues of expansive coloniality, status, and the economy of two variables: here and there—a metropolitan area connected by labour, soccer, *carnes asadas*, and the *Cerro de la Silla*.

In 2017, Monterrey's municipal government, in conjunction with federal agencies, opted to “brighten up” the gray ambiance—the consequence of unfinished houses and concrete infrastructure—of fourteen neighbourhood houses located on the hill *Loma Larga*, and painted them all with colourful tones. *Loma Larga* is located between Monterrey and San Pedro Garza Garcia, one of the top cities in the country that offers the best quality of life and is known to be one of the richest.<sup>33</sup> The city announced that their goal was to *poner colour* (add colour) to the houses and socially intervene in the area to make social cohesion.<sup>34</sup> This plan is common in Mexico, where the social, housing, and corruption issues are hidden by the government with the superficiality of vibrant colours, making a pleasant panoramic scene from the Constitución avenue, one of the busiest of the city, which passes next to the hill of *Loma Larga*.

One of the eye-catching elements of Cartagena’s “Fragmented Cities” series is the colourful streetscape of the suburbia. The development project shows a near extinction of individuality with repeated housing models—but it has, indeed, been visually enlivened by the different colours of the houses, which then contrast sharply with the surrounding, distressed landscape. Upon the land are houses whose foundations are built with cheap materials from

---

<sup>33</sup> Sheila Ramírez, “Las 10 Ciudades De México Que Ofrecen Mayor Calidad De Vida.” *Forbes México*, December 27, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com.mx/forbes-life/las-10-ciudades-de-mexico-con-mayor-calidad-de-vida/>.

<sup>34</sup> Miriam Abrego, “Dan Color a Lado Regio Del Cerro De La Loma Larga.” *elhorizonte*. ElHorizonte, October 8, 2017. <https://d.elhorizonte.mx/local/dan-color-a-lado-regio-del-cerro-de-la-loma-larga/1980549>.

exploited mountains and hills, next to rivers which flood houses every rainy season causing families to lose their patrimony. Will the vibrant colours help fix these problems?

In 2015, the Blue Bottle Coffee, a tiny kitchen on the rooftop of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, created a dessert made with ice cream and trio sorbet inspired by Cartagena's colourful housing landscapes<sup>35</sup> —a colourful and folkloric dessert made in the United States to satisfy and entertain a lucky customer for a couple of minutes. Does the application of the artist's perspective and aesthetic approaches to the narrative of the exploitation of infinite vibrant houses, create a stereotypical Mexican landscape image? Does this paradoxical narrative fuel the exoticism of the vibrant Mexican culture in the international sphere?

Through these landscape photographs, the colourful houses engage as icons of identity—identity both as a collective and marginal space. The visual composition choices throughout the series, interrogates the exploited natural elements surrounding these expansionist models and their meaning in the land. The landscape photographs show extensive human intervention and inter-relation of humanity and nature.<sup>36</sup> We view an absence of humans in this series: who are the people caught up in the discourses and ideas of this abandoned and sinister homeownership dream?<sup>37</sup> In 2015, Infonavit opened an investigation to determine possible causes of housing abandonment and one of them was the acquisition of housing without the interest to inhabit it.<sup>38</sup> Cartagena depicts the abandonments in the open and natural lands of Monterrey, generating visual analysis and critical discussions of residential construction practices in Mexico.

---

<sup>35</sup> See figure 2.

<sup>36</sup> Liz Wells, *Land Matters: Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2011. p. 261.

<sup>37</sup> See Figure 3.

<sup>38</sup> Ricardo Fernández, “Atlas Del Abandono De Vivienda.” 47, *Instituto del Fondo Nacional para la Vivienda de los Trabajadores*, 2015. [https://infonavit.janium.net/janium-bin/janium\\_login.pl](https://infonavit.janium.net/janium-bin/janium_login.pl).

Cartagena walks through the streets, climbs hills, and explores the suburbia as someone who wants to buy a house in that neighbourhood. Walking as part of the documentation process gives a sense of the photographer's journey—a means of not reaching an end.<sup>39</sup> This ground-perspective camera position is important. In contrast, in Jorge Taboada's "Alta Densidad" photo series, we see an aerial perspective, high enough to show abstract patterns in the urban development—an infinite apocalyptic representation of homes in the expansionist model in Latin America.<sup>40</sup> Both photographers include the whole neighbourhood development in their photo series. However, with his unique documentation process of walking and exploring by land, Cartagena's views offer a grounded individuality and a single, perspectival point from which the viewer can observe the whole—a small individual insight, for small homes.

At the end of "Fragmented Cities," Cartagena had the urge to go deeper in his subject's background and began to document the suburban rivers with the photo series "Lost Rivers" to depict how human corruption began to alter Monterrey's landscape. As a consequence of unplanned urban development and other action-reactions, rivers dried out or completely disappeared.<sup>41</sup> In his words, he questioned himself: "Why am I just documenting what is visible to everybody?" This is when he began a dialogue with the people living in the suburbia and started to understand the social and environmental dynamics and the ways in which the housing developers were profiting from these legal loopholes.<sup>42</sup> This dissatisfaction with the limitations of the visible led to Cartagena's most celebrated photography work.

---

<sup>39</sup> Liz Wells, *Land Matters: Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2011. p. 285

<sup>40</sup> Jorge Taboada, "Alta Densidad." jorgetaboada. Accessed August 5, 2020. <https://jorgetaboada.wixsite.com/jorgetaboada/alta-densidad>.

<sup>41</sup> "Alejandro Cartagena Is a Mexican Photographer, Studio Artist and Bookmaker." Alejandro Cartagena. Accessed July 15, 2020. <https://alejandrocartergena.com/h/home/suburbia-mexicana-lost-rivers/>

<sup>42</sup> Alejandro Cartagena, "Learning from Latin America (Sub)Urbanism." Toronto, 2015. <http://blog.ocad.ca/wordpress/photo/2015/05/alejandro-cartagena-at-ocad-u/>.

Cartagena began to portray the people living in suburbia and used their bodies not only to understand their social and living conditions, but also to send a message. The addition of human bodies in his suburbia project was intended to humanize the landscape and add faces to the contemporary world struggles. Thus, in my interpretation of “People of Suburbia” I question: is it necessary to use human bodies to humanize a landscape? Can such elements echo social issues and engage with a broader audience without victimizing human bodies?

### **Carpoolers**

It’s four in the morning and is still dark in Monterrey’s metropolitan suburbia, but the day starts in the dark. In the year of 2011, Cartagena began a new photo series called “Carpoolers” which uses the new visual device of the highway to connect the suburban landscape with Monterrey’s metropolitan area. Captured from the vantage point of the top of a pedestrian bridge located on the 85 highway of Monterrey—the one between Julio Jugueterias in the start of the avenue Gonzalitos and the store Liverpool, for a better local context— he fully frames trucks crowded with tools and people in transit to their jobs in order to capture a fleeting connection between the suburban and the urban.<sup>43</sup>

The federal highway 85 starts from Mexico City and finishes in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, where one of many Mexico-United States borders is located. This is a subtle gesture to the major motivation for people to migrate: better labour opportunities. The highway also connects the suburbia with San Pedro Garza Garcia, a wealthy suburb aforementioned. This

---

<sup>43</sup> Rena Silverman, “Mexican Carpoolers: A Photographer's View Of Truck Bed Commuters.” NPR. NPR, January 11, 2015. <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2015/01/11/375922456/mexican-carpoolers-a-photographers-view-of-truck-bed-commuters>.

results in an examination of a global capitalist problem from a local perspective, making local references of power, movement of people, and labour.<sup>44</sup>

Cartagena frames a chaotic scene in the back of the truck. One of the significant elements that consistently identifies Cartagena's work is the process of walking in his documentation. The usage of a pedestrian bridge exemplifies the importance of this documentation process of his work. His view is not the aerial or drone views we are so accustomed to now—Mexicans recognize this view as the pedestrian bridge view, and that makes all the difference in the construction of the image. Pedestrian bridges are common in the Mexican urban landscape, a construction built for the pedestrian to avoid crossing the expansive busy avenues. They are also a precedent of how cities are built in Mexican urbanization, where drivers are a priority, rather than implementing actions to improve accessibility and restore the comfort of citizens who transit the city on foot over people who use a vehicle. People transit in the back of a truck because of the long distances between their homes and jobs, the lack of resources to buy a vehicle, the inefficiency of public transportation planning where the suburbia lacks bus stops, and to divide the transit expenses with the others in the truck.<sup>45</sup>

Does the truck driver have the same visual panorama as the ones in the back? The connection of making the invisible visible from a pedestrian bridge is not a coincidence. The now visible bodies in the back of a truck are invisible to those who can travel in their own vehicles. The privileged ones. The ones that move the people. The drivers. As viewers, we are able to see the invisible, making us a privileged agent in the event of photography. There is a strong presence of masculinity in the "Carpoolers" series. Who are the ones that construct and do

---

<sup>44</sup> See Figure 4.

<sup>45</sup> See Figure 5.

manual labour in Mexico? One engaging narrative that Cartagena reveals through his unique point of view, is how these northern Mexican masculine bodies are huddled, sometimes under blankets, in a vulnerable position.<sup>46</sup>

“Como Pancho Villa, con sus dos viejas a la orilla.”

"Pancho Villa, with his two ladies by his side.”

The above is a Mexican colloquial phrase considered misogynist by some, and for others, a proud anthem of the Mexican machism<sup>47</sup>. Pancho Villa is an essential character in Mexican revolution history, but also an archetype built in national films and songs to re-enforce the masculine identity. Villa was born in Durango but was an important character in the North of Mexico. He led the North Division during the Mexican revolution and was assassinated in Parral, Chihuahua. According to Cuitláhuac Chávez’s research about Villa’s national identity and Mexican masculinity in different films, the film *Entre Pancho Villa y Una Mujer Desnuda* from the directors Sabina Berman and Isabelle Tardán writes Pancho Villa as a character with superiority. Such superiority and disdain for women has been adopted by modern Mexico.<sup>48</sup>

This is an interesting analysis to better understand Mexican northern identity through national history and the representation of it in national films, but also in Hollywood. Adding this macho identity context in Cartagena’s framing enhances understanding of the proximity of the

---

<sup>46</sup> “Alejandro Cartagena Is a Mexican Photographer, Studio Artist and Bookmaker.” Alejandro Cartagena. Accessed July 15, 2020. <https://alejandrocartagena.com/h/home/carpoolers-4/>

<sup>47</sup> I refer to Mexican Machism as a Mexican cultural hypermasculinity performance of superiority and aggressivity towards any relationship with women.

<sup>48</sup> Cuitláhuac Chávez, “La Figura mítica De Pancho Villa Como ícono De Identidad Nacional y Masculinidad En México y En La Frontera México-Estados Unidos a través De La Literatura y El Cine.” Dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 2013, p. 21.

bodies depicted in a north Mexican culture. The proximity of their bodies is the consequence of seasonal weather, where sometimes it is necessary to keep close to each other to keep warm. Is vulnerability acceptable when it's related to labour?

There are many reasons for the practice of laying in the back of the truck: the transit commodity, extra time to sleep, security, and the most important one—it is illegal in Mexico to be in the back of a truck. By viewing the bodies from above, this illegal practice is uncovered. Revealed by Cartagena, the view from the bridge gives the photographer's viewers an insider's perspective of labour practices evidently concealed from landscape-based positions. The view is unnatural and offers us new ways to interpret what we see. Cartagena's aesthetic innovation has thereby created powerful interest in his subject. Similarly, developers use illegal practices regarding home construction for their advantage. Mexicans, on the other hand, use those legal loopholes to survive.

Monterrey and its residents—colloquially called *regios*—are not so different from the rest of Mexico's cities' social dynamics. Similar to understanding the Mexican landscape as marked with a history of colonial violence and social exclusion, it is important to understand Mexican society's experiences with internal colonialism. The Mexican sociologist Pablo González Casanova argues that after a colonial structure disappears—where foreigners subjugated and exploited communities—and when a political independence occurs, a new nation arises where mestizos and/or others continue to exploit these communities. In contemporary Mexico, this is an internal phenomenon where the mestizo takes the place of the colonizer.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Pablo González Casanova and Marcos Roitman Rosemann, "El Colonialismo Interno (1969)." Essay. In *De La sociología Del Poder a La sociología De La explotación Pensar América Latina En El Siglo XXI*, 129–56. Bogotá: CLACSO, 2009. p. 146.



The “Carpoolers” photo series combined with an understanding of the internal colonialism in Mexico, reveals the presence of workforce exploitation. Furthermore, by framing the cars individually, Cartagena perhaps signals the privacy of this activity. The scene is tightly contained by the car’s perimeter, an internal framing device. We see how the labour is transported from marginalized areas to satisfy and build cities for the powerful—in this case, San Pedro Garza García—and we sense the absence of a dominant class that may proudly identify as Mexican, but still exploits the land and others for their convenience and to keep their power. The “Carpoolers” series symbolizes labour movement and the photographs, as objects in the event of photography, raise awareness for international audiences. The unique observational perspective plane resembles visuals taken from a security camera. Some subjects look down, others up.

### **Mexican Representation on Imagery**

In discussing the elements within Cartagena’s photographs, it is imperative to analyze the photographs with the prism of decolonization to create a discussion about the varying layers of violence in the photographing of landscapes and portraits. In his book, *Decolonising the Camera: Photography in Racial Time*, Mark Sealy demands the recognition of racist ideologies in photography since its inception and throughout its history. Photography is a racialized medium and should be practiced with consciousness through its event and throughout the reading of the photograph.<sup>50</sup> He states, “Decolonising the photographic image is an act of unburdening it from

---

<sup>50</sup> Mark Sealy, *Decolonising the Camera: Photography in Racial Time*. London: Lawrence et Wishart, 2019. p.2.

the assumed, normative, hegemonic, colonial conditions present, consciously or unconsciously, in the moment of its original making and in its readings and displays.”<sup>51</sup>

Images picturing Mexican bodies have filled the media and internet, some to fuel anti-Mexican and anti-Immigrant policies. The camera plays a role in the event of photography to become a powerful object that can generate empathy with its character and construction.<sup>52</sup> The photographer invites us to engage in proximity, person-to-person, viewer to subject, directly. There is no abstraction like in far-away aerial views.

“Carpoolers” and “Suburbia Mexicana” have provoked a national and international conversation about Mexican labourers. In my view, this has been both welcome and worrisome. I recognize the photographic mastery inherent in these images and the important function they serve as social art. However, the re-inscription of visual stereotypes within the work impacts not only Mexico’s internal perspective as a cultural community, but also effects how the international sphere perceives this/our community. The images have become internationally famous for both these contradictory reasons, and this is—ultimately—what remains fascinating about them.

Cartagena is a native Mexican and if we look at his entire oeuvre, we can see that he is building a more nuanced Mexican identity and broader conversation about Mexican social and political issues. Yet, “Carpoolers” is his most internationally famous work. Why? Do they meet international expectations of what “Mexicanity” means? Mexico has been blessed and damned

---

<sup>51</sup> Though Mark is referring here to black communities and the Western photographic construction of black subjectivity built upon colonialist legacies, the notion can be similarly applied to Mexican identities, based on Yásnaya Elena Aguilar’s affirmations about Mexico not being a nation but a state of many oppressed nations and founded on the idea of exclusion.

<sup>52</sup> Ariella Azoulay and Louise Bethlehem, “What Is Photography?” Essay In *Civil Imagination a Political Ontology of Photography*, London: Verso, 2012, p. 11–27.

with the extensive photographic works made by foreign and Mexican visual artists. These narratives create a romanization of labour in images and are accepted worldwide. Picturing Mexico's otherness—by Mexican and foreign image creators—is problematic; it favours essentialism.

Photography is indeed a political event which extends beyond all phases of its being. While extensive photographic works can help in the international awareness of social and political injustices, such as labour conditions and migrational plights, the aestheticization practice of minority bodies within imagery can be a harmful tool for creating visual regimes. These regimes have impacted photographic constructions of national narratives, the representation of Mexican bodies, and human rights. Such practices need to be critically examined and undergo a careful methodology of viewing and interpretation. Photographic works—such as the “Carpoolers” and “Suburbia Mexicana” series—as effective as they are, still need to be evaluated through a lens of cultural identity, power dynamics, and racial politics.

## Works Cited

- Abrego, Miriam. "Dan Color a Lado Regio Del Cerro De La Loma Larga." *elhorizonte*. El Horizonte, October 8, 2017. <https://d.elhorizonte.mx/local/dan-color-a-lado-regio-del-cerro-de-la-loma-larga/1980549>.
- Alejandro Cartagena Is a Mexican Photographer, Studio Artist and Bookmaker. Alejandro Cartagena. Accessed July 15, 2020. <http://www.alejandrocartergena.com/>.
- Azoulay, Ariella, and Louise Bethlehem. "What Is Photography?" Essay. In *Civil Imagination a Political Ontology of Photography*, 11–27. London: Verso, 2012.
- Cartagena, Alejandro, and Aaron Rothman. "Fragmented Cities: Suburbs of Monterrey, Mexico." *Places Journal*, January 1, 2011. <https://placesjournal.org/article/fragmented-cities/>.
- Cartagena, Alejandro. "Learning from Latin America (Sub)Urbanism." Toronto, 2015. <http://blog.ocad.ca/wordpress/photo/2015/05/alejandro-cartagena-at-ocad-u/>.
- Casanova, Pablo González, and Marcos Roitman Rosemann. "El Colonialismo Interno (1969)." Essay. In *De La sociología Del Poder a La sociología De La explotación Pensar América Latina En El Siglo XXI*, 129–56. Bogotá: CLACSO, 2009.
- Chávez, Cuitláhuac. "La Figura mítica De Pancho Villa Como ícono De Identidad Nacional y Masculinidad En México y En La Frontera México-Estados Unidos a través De La Literatura y El Cine." Dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 2013.
- Fernández, Ricardo. "Atlas Del Abandono De Vivienda." *Instituto del Fondo Nacional para la Vivienda de los Trabajadores*, 2015. [https://infonavit.janium.net/janium-bin/janium\\_login.pl](https://infonavit.janium.net/janium-bin/janium_login.pl).
- Freeman, Caitlin. *Modern Art Desserts*, January 1, 1965. <https://www.modernartdesserts.com/>.
- Freire-Medeiros, Bianca, Julia O'Donnell, and Fernando Luiz Lara. "Thoughts on Our Shared (and Exclusionary) Traditions." Preface. In *Urban Latin America: Images, Words, Flows and the Built Environment*, X–XV. London: Routledge, 2018.

- Gilbert, Alan. "La Vivienda En América Latina ." *Instituto Interamericano para el Desarrollo Social, Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo.*, I-7UE/Es , September 2001, 32. <https://publications.iadb.org/publications/spanish/document/La-vivienda-en-Am%C3%A9rica-Latina.pdf>.
- Mraz, John. Introduction. In *Looking for Mexico: Modern Visual Culture and National Identity*, 1–12. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.
- Piporro (Lalo González) "Soy De Monterrey" track #10 on 15 Exitos De Colección, Orfeon, 2012, CD.
- López Estrada, Raul Eduardo, and Jorge Leal Iga. "Social Housing Policy in Mexico: The Case of a Neighborhood in Monterrey Peripheral." *Cuadernos de Vivienda y Urbanismo* 5, no. 10 (2012): 273.  
<https://doi.org/https://www.proquest.com/openview/ed174f26e18b8daf4a7583c76b307904/1?cbl=2041077&pq-origsite=gscholar>.
- Ramírez, Sheila. "Las 10 Ciudades De México Que Ofrecen Mayor Calidad De Vida." *Forbes México*, December 27, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com.mx/forbes-life/las-10-ciudades-de-mexico-con-mayor-calidad-de-vida/>.
- Rivas, César Villanueva. "The Rise and Fall of Mexico's International Image: Stereotypical Identities, Media Strategies and Diplomacy Dilemmas." *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 7, no. 1 (February 2011): 23–31. <https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2011.4>.
- Sealy, Mark. *Decolonising the Camera: Photography in Racial Time*. London: Lawrence et Wishart, 2019.
- Silverman, Rena. "Mexican Carpoolers: A Photographer's View Of Truck Bed Commuters." NPR. NPR, January 11, 2015.  
<https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2015/01/11/375922456/mexican-carpoolers-a-photographers-view-of-truck-bed-commuters>.
- Taboada, Jorge. "Alta Densidad." *jorgetaboada*. Accessed August 5, 2020.  
<https://jorgetaboada.wixsite.com/jorgetaboada/alta-densidad>.
- Wells, Liz. Essay. In *Land Matters: Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity*, 261. London: I.B. Tauris, 2011.

## List of Figures

**Figure 1.0** *Apodaca I*, Alejandro Cartagena, from the series “Fragmented Cities”, 2006 – 2009



**Figure 2.0** Dessert inspired from Cartagena’s “Fragmented Cities” project, made by Blue Bottle Coffee, a kitchen located on the rooftop of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art





**Figure 3.0** *Santa Catarina I*, Alejandro Cartagena, from the series “Fragmented Cities”, 2006 – 2009



**Figure 4** *Carpooler #11*, Alejandro Cartagena, from the series “Carpoolers”, 2011



**Figure 5** *Carpooler #38*, Alejandro Cartagena, from the series “Carpoolers”, 2011





## Curriculum Vitae

### Education

- 2019 - 2021 Masters of Fine Art, Western University, London, Ontario.  
2014 - 2017 BA Communication Studies, Universidad del Valle de México, Saltillo, Coahuila.  
2016 Universidad Europea de Madrid, Madrid, Spain.

### Awards

- 2021 Graduate Thesis Research Award, Faculty of Arts & Humanities, Western University  
2020 Mary Routledge Fellowship, Faculty of Arts & Humanities, Western University  
2019 - 2021 Western Graduate Research Scholarship, Department of Visual Arts, Western University  
2019 Dean's Entrance Scholarship, Faculty of Arts & Humanities, Western University  
2019 Chair's Entrance Scholarship, Department of Visual Arts, Western University  
2014 - 2017 Academic Excellence Scholarship, Universidad del Valle de Mexico, Saltillo, Coahuila

### Exhibitions

#### Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2021 The Other Neighbour of El Otro Lado (Canada) / MFA thesis exhibition, Artlab and Cohen Commons Gallery, London, Ontario.  
2021 The Other Neighbour of El Otro Lado (México) / MFA thesis exhibition, El Nodo, Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico.  
2021 Symphony of Lights (co-curated with Dr. Cody Barteet and Ph.D. candidate Ira Kazi), *Part of Dr. Cody Barteet's research program: Preserving the Cultural and Artistic Heritage of St. John the Evangelist, London, Ontario as a Model for the Anglican Diocese of Huron, a project funded by the University of Western Ontario*  
2017 Donde Se Limpia, Museo el Centenario, San Pedro Garza García, Nuevo León, Mexico  
2017 Donde Se Limpia, Galería el Lago of Casa Alameda, Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico  
2017 Donde Se Limpia, Escuelas Pías de San Fernando Gallery, Madrid, Spain

#### Selected Group and Duo Exhibitions

- 2021 Not For Viewing, first edition, London, Ontario  
2021 IWD Virtual Exhibition, Embassy Cultural House, London, Ontario  
2021 Distance Makes The Heart Grow Weak, Artlab, London, Ontario  
2020 Feria de Arte EAP 2020 curated by the Escuela de Artes Plásticas Rubén Herrera from The Autonomous University of Coahuila, Casa Córdoba Gallery, Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico  
2020 Nuit Violette, USC Public Arts Event (Western University), London, Ontario  
2020 Be Here. Be There, Forest City Gallery, London, Ontario  
2020 Modos Contemporáneos De La Belleza Virtual exhibition curated by Talía Barredo, funded by state's Secretary of Culture, Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico  
2020 Miradas Del Confinamiento virtual exhibition curated by Talía Barredo, funded by funded by state's Secretary of Culture, Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico

- 2020 VI Festival Video nodoCCS 2020, 51K Arteriet/Art gallery - Kristiansand, Norway
- 2020 Figurative Speaking virtual exhibition curated by Claire Kidd, Glasgow, Scotland
- 2020 <http://store.tongue.beautiful.goods.temporary.feet.web>, Artlab, London, Ontario
- 2020 ANEW curated by Harper Wellman, Cohen Commons Gallery, London, Ontario
- 2020 Liminal: Interstices Between and Betwixt, Beaver Hall Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
- 2020 To dwell, To remember curated by Adi Berardini, Cohen Commons Gallery, London, Ontario
- 2019 OCRA Arte Contemporáneo, Museo de la Revolución Mexicana, Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico
- 2018 Fecha de Caducidad with textile artist Jeisel Hernández, Recinto universitario, Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico
- 2018 Fecha de caducidad with textile artist Jeisel Hernández, Galería de la Alianza Francesa, San Pedro Garza García, Nuevo León, Mexico

### **Nominations**

- 2020 Finalist for the 26th Latin American Documentary Photography Contest “Los Trabajos y Los Días”, Medellín, Colombia

### **Curatorial Projects**

- 2021 Symphony of Lights (co-curated with Dr. Cody Barteet and Ph.D. candidate Ira Kazi), Artlab and Cohen Commons Gallery, London, Ontario

### **External Organizations, Committees and Editorial Activities**

- 2021 Programming Chair, Board of Directors, Forest City Gallery, London, Ontario
- 2021 Peer Reviewer, tba: Journal of Art, Media, and Visual Culture, London, Ontario
- 2021 Contributor, Embassy Cultural House, London, Ontario
- 2020 Fundraising Chair, Board of Directors, Forest City Gallery, London, Ontario
- 2019 Jury committee for Pitching Audiovisual organized and supervised under Dr. Adriana Moreno, at the Faculty of Communication Sciences from The Autonomous University of, Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico

### **Lectures, Artist Talks, and Workshops**

- 2021 Artist Talk, Universidad La Salle de México, Saltillo, Coahuila
- 2020 Virtual Artist Talk, Museo Privado, Mexico City
- 2020 Lecture, *La Representación del “Otro” en la Fotografía*, for Advanced Photography at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas Ruben Herrera from The Autonomous University of Coahuila - Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico
- 2020 Lecture, *Representación de Inmigrantes Mexicanos en la Fotografía*, for Intro to Digital Photo at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas Ruben Herrera from The Autonomous University of Coahuila - Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico
- 2014 Photography workshop Cloudy Castle at the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey Campus Saltillo (ITESM), Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico

### **Catalogues and Journals**

- 2021 Yolk. Volume 1.2 Montreal-based Literary Journal, Montreal, Quebec,

2021	Distance Makes The Heart Grow Weak (Visual Arts Department in Western University), London, Ontario
2020	Figurative Speaking Exhibition Catalogue, Glasgow, Scotland
2020	ANew Exhibition Catalogue, London, Ontario
2020	Luminal Exhibition Catalogue, Toronto, Ontario
2020	To Dwell, To Remember Exhibition Catalogue, London, Ontario

### **Selected Work Experience**

2021	WSSI Internship, Faculty of Art and Humanities, London, Ontario
2021	Graduate Teaching Assistant, Introduction to Digital Photo, Western University
2021	Graphic Designer, Centre for Sustainable Curating at the Visual Arts Department supervised under Dr. Kirsty Robertson
2020	Graduate Teaching Assistant, Introduction to Digital Photo, Western University
2020	Photographer for research project: Preserving The Cultural and Artistic Heritage of St. John the Evangelist, supervised under Dr. Cody Barteet, Department of Visual Arts at Western University, London, Ontario
2020	Research Assistant, supervised under Dr. Sarah Bassnett, Department of Visual Arts at Western University, London, Ontario
2020	Graduate Teaching Assistant, Introduction to Drawing, Western University
2019 - 2020	Research Assistant, supervised under Dr. Christine Sprengler, Department of Visual Arts at Western University, London, Ontario
2019	Graduate Teaching Assistant, Honours Studio Seminar, Western University
2016	Cinematographer, Documentary directed by Busi Cortés, Research Line Project: Senescence and Aging, for the Sciences and Humanities for the Interdisciplinary Development Ph.D. Program, of the LabComplex. Funded by CEIICH-UNAM
2016 - 2019	Digital Project Manager, We The Force Studios, Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico
2016	Digital Producer, Grupo W, Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico

### **Selected Related Press**

2021	Interview with Hay Con Queso channel, season 2, episode 10
2020	Local Talent feature, interview about artistic practice, Circulo 360, Vanguardia newspaper
2018	Cover and Art Interview, Friday!, Zócalo newspaper
2018	Interview with Nidia Martinez about “Fecha de Caducidad” exhibition, Art Section Vanguardia newspaper
2018	TV interview for the channel "TV Azteca Saltillo" about Fecha de Caducidad exhibition
2018	TV interview for the channel "Multimedios Saltillo" about Fecha de Caducidad exhibition
2017	Review by Argentina Barrietos about Donde Se Limpia exhibition and project, Art Section Vanguardia newspaper